The purpose of this chapter is to examine the possibilities of monitoring distance from and progress towards ‘meeting basic needs’ at the local level. On the basis of the critique of the statistical evidence presented in the body of the book a number of basic principles can be proposed and these are elaborated in Section 14.1. An ‘ideal’ system can be specified, quite easily, on paper; but that specification raises a number of issues about aggregation and about the nature of the indicators required which are discussed in Section 14.2. Section 14.3 discusses the development of local level monitoring over the last thirty years, and the final section considers the problems of introducing community control over this (or any) statistical system.

14.1 SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES OF INDICATOR CONSTRUCTION FOR DEMOCRATIC MONITORING

First, data are produced not collected: they depend on underlying concepts and on a system of processing in which different agents have different interests and tasks. Equally, the historical and social context of measurement is important: for example, the ready access of quantitative measures and techniques for aggregates of things has dominated the way in which statistical systems have developed. In sum, measurement work and statistical work are not socially or theoretically autonomous activities.

Consequently, the activity of measurement itself is a potential agent for change. Indeed, the potential of data measurement to influence policy often leads to its suppression, even when no-one disagrees about the concepts or definitions. For example, Gordon (1979) gives a graphic account of her experiences as Director of the Bawku Applied Nutrition Programme in Ghana over a five-year
period. She shows how information had to be used in a political way to arouse public opinion to put pressure on leaders, etc. She concludes, ruefully, that 'conventionally trained nutritionists and doctors are not always skilled in presenting their case to the right people' (Gordon, 1979, p. 8). We also have to recognise the political role of information.

Second, everyone might agree that a particular phenomenon is worth measuring, but the actual indicator chosen would vary according to the clientele. Consider, for example, school attendance, which everyone wants to know something about. The government planner, typically, will be interested in enrolment, repeater and drop-out ratios, pupil–teacher ratios, construction costs and so on; people would be more interested in access to different types of educational facilities, what they can learn in different 'institutional' contexts (it need not, of course, be a building, or even a formal programme): and concerned pedagogues in the type of resources that are needed to impart the type of knowledge which is socially useful.

Third, the same indicator can be used in various ways. Thus, an indicator of individual well-being may reflect a current condition, membership of a risk group, or a trend in the causative factors. Accordingly,

a change in the use of an indicator from, for example, the diagnosis and treatment of malnutrition in the individual, to the quantifying of risk for families or communities, or to the analysis of trends and changes, requires a change in definition and significance of that indicator. This dependence raises fundamental questions about the procedure for defining indicators, about who should be involved in the process, and about the role and objectives of research.


In general one must be very wary of how an index is used, as opposed to how it was developed.

Finally, since social change can only be carried out by people, measures and statistical activities should be on the human level and, as far as possible, organised around their possibilities for change. In principle, this means that we have to understand how people develop their own goals in their social environment and how they develop their own measurement criteria. In practical terms, many authors have